DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 181 683 EC 122 817

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TITLE Educational Policy and Research with Reference to Educable Mentally Retarded Pupils in Israel.
PUB DATE Sep 79
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (87th, New York, NY, September, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cooperation; *Educable Mentally Handicapped; *Educational Policy; Elementary Secondary Education; Exceptional Child Research; Foreign Countries; Program Development; *Program Evaluation; Research Reviews (Publications)
IDENTIFIERS *Israel

ABSTRACT

Through review of the research the paper contends that the policy in Israel with respect to special education for educable mentally handicapped students has been based on the prevailing cultural "zeitgeist" rather than on research and evaluation of current and past programs; that the modest amount of research that has been done in Israel does not justify recent changes in the educational policy; and that it is in the best interest of pupils, teachers, parents, and society as a whole that there be closer cooperation between those who determine and institute educational policy and those who empirically evaluate current and contemplated programs. (Author/PHR)

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EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND RESEARCH WITH REFERENCE TO EDUCABLE MENTALLY RETARDED PUPILS IN ISRAEL

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to show that (a) policy in Israel with respect to special education for educable mentally retarded children and adolescents has been based on the prevailing cultural zeitgeist rather than upon research and evaluation of current and past programs; (b) the modest amount of research that has been done in Israel does not justify recent changes in this educational policy; and (c) it is in the best interest of pupils, teachers, parents, and society as a whole that there be closer cooperation between those who determine and institute educational policy and those who empirically evaluate current and contemplated programs.

Special education in Israel has drawn heavily upon the European tradition in establishing two major settings: special schools and special classes within regular schools. Children enter the one or the other as their retarded condition becomes evident, remain through eight grades, and then enter work apprenticeship programs or programs which combine continuing formal education and job training. Most graduates of these programs are expected to serve in the army and after completing military service to function as independent adults in society. Since Israel can

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absorb large numbers of semi-skilled and unskilled blue collar workers, the vast majority of these young people do find employment.

Both settings exist throughout the country and officially at least children are referred to the setting closest to home. There is, however, an informalpolicy of selective placement in some school districts of assigning the more capable and better adjusted pupils to the special classes.

In the last decade there has been a further shift in the educational policy of the Ministry of Education: a gradual phasing out of the special schools and their replacement by special classes. Moreover, word of the mainstreaming movement in the United States has reached Israel and there is now a tendency to retain or to re-integrate educable retarded children and adolescents in regular classrooms. Successful mainstreaming is predicated on the assumption that remedial instruction in deficient academic subjects will be provided, but there is no assurance that help will be actually forthcoming.

If these developments were based on systematic evaluation of existing programs, this writer would have no objection to what is taking place. Unfortunately there has been little research on special education in Israel, and current policy is based on a number of questionable assumptions such as the following:

(a) Attendance in a special class in a regular school constitutes integration which is good, whereas attendance in a special school constitutes segregation which is bad.

(b) Less social stigmatization is experienced by special class pupils than by special school pupils, and perhaps none is experienced by educable retarded pupils in regular classes, because social stigmatization

is directly related to formal labeling and degree of educational segregation from non-retarded school-mates.

(c) Pupils attending the more integrated settings achieve better in all activities - academic, social and psychological - than pupils in segregated settings.

What evidence, if any, supports these statements? The many studies done in the United States are not helpful for several reasons. (1) In Israel the special class is regarded as the integrated setting, whereas in the United States it is the segregated setting and it is an open question whether special school, special class, and regular class constitute a single bipolar continuum of segregation-integration. (2) These studies frequently yielded conflicting findings and were plagued by methodological problems whatever the direction of the findings. (3) All too frequently investigators reported only the statistical significance of the differences between settings and did not evaluate or discuss the practical significance of the obtained differences. It is unclear from these studies whether the differences reported made that much of a difference.

A few studies have been conducted in Israel on these questions. In one of the earliest, Kubobi and Flume (1964) compared borderline children in special schools and in regular classes and found the latter to be somewhat higher in academic achievement, but lower in social and emotional adjustment, this despite the likelihood that children referred from regular classes to special schools had more behavior problems to begin with. Three studies were completed in recent years. Benporat (1976) compared educable retarded and slow learning children, ages 9-13, in special schools and special classes on a variety of achievement tests and measures of personal and social adjustment. He obtained a

statistically significant difference only on reading comprehension, and the practical significance of this difference was minimal. Benmenachem (1978) compared educable retarded children, ages 11-13, and found no difference on Raven Matrices, general anxiety, test anxiety and other adjustment measures. She did find, however, differences favoring special class children on several subtests of a group verbal intelligence test (sentence completion, oddities, and arithmetic reasoning) and on an arithmetic achievement test; there was also a difference favoring the special classes on reading comprehension, significant at the .10 level. Considerable overlap was found, however, with groups of children from some special schools doing better than groups from some special classes. Moreover, the informal policy of assigning the less capable children to the special schools may have accounted for these findings.

How these children viewed themselves and their educational setting and how they felt they were seen and treated by others was investigated by Benmenachem (1978) and Kariv (1978). Both investigators read aloud structured questionnaires to individual children, ages 11-13. If we combine the results of both studies, we find that the similarities between educable retarded pupils in special schools and in special classes are far greater than the differences. These children acknowledge that they learn more slowly than other children, they clearly prefer their own special education setting over the other, and they describe largely positive social relations with nonretarded children at school and in the neighborhood. Admittedly two-thirds reported that on one occasion or more they were teased by other children for attending a special class or school, and about half the special school children and a quarter of

the special class children said that their school (class) was not held in high regard by neighborhood children. Nevertheless, their positive experiences with friends from the other classes and schools were the rule, and the teasing episodes the exception.

There was a major difference between children in the two settings with respect to their preferences for other educational options. The majority of children who did want to switch from their present setting preferred greater integration (i.e.,greater proximity to non-retarded children): about a third of the special school children would shift to a special class in the regular school, but only about a fifth of the special class children would shift to the special school. Although loyal to their setting, however, the special class children would prefer a still more integrated setting - the regular or heterogeneous class, assuming they would receive the necessary tutorial help. This desire ran counter to, but was not dampened by, the awareness of these children that they were slow learners and would encounter difficulties in the regular classroom. Thus, no special education setting frees all its pupils from dissatisfaction and a desire to learn elsewhere.

How veridical is the report of social acceptance by the retarded children? Kariv attempted to answer this question by administering questionnaires to non-retarded children, half of whom were drawn from schools with special classes and half from schools without special classes, in order to ascertain whether the opportunity for first hand contact with retarded children labeled as such affected perceptions, behavior and attitudes toward them. Interestingly enough, she found that contact had no effect on the largely positive responses of the non-retarded children. They said that special education children are

like everybody else except that they learn more slowly. Most welcomed the introduction of the special classes in their schools, although a significant minority said that retarded children would learn better in a special school of their own. They admitted to playing with special class children in school and included children from special education among their friends in the neighborhood without fear of social opprobrium. With regard to mainstreaming, most felt that these children would find it very difficult to learn academic subjects with them, but welcomed joint activities in non-academic areas.

Kariv investigated a third issue: how do teachers perceive special education, especially those working in the field, but also teachers of regular classes, some of whom have contact with special class pupils in their schools? She found that (a) special education teachers identify strongly with their respective setting, viewing it as more appropriate for educable retarded children than the other; (b) both groups agreed that the special school prepared its graduates better for gainful employment as independent adults; (c) if anything, the committment of the special school teachers to remain in that setting was even stronger than that of the special class teachers (95% versus 80%), but the former were not blind to the fact that some of their pupils preferred to shift to special classes; (d) teachers of regular classes replied on the basis of their daily experience, with teachers whose schools contained special classes preferring that type of special education, and with teachers whose schools did not include special classes preferring the special school.

Kariv found that teachers paint a somewhat bleaker picture of the social acceptance of educable retarded children in school and in the

neighborhood than do the children themselves. One possibility is that the teachers know better or report more accurately what is taking place. A more likely possibility is that the teachers are more affected by occasional unpleasant episodes than by the more frequent positive experiences and that their perceptions do not reflect the reality experienced by the children. In general, the overall findings provide scant support for the fears of some educators or parents that either of the two existing special education settings severely stigmatizes pupils, and suggest that adult fears may be exaggerated in other aspects of these questions as well.

The data of the above three studies would appear to support maintaining both types of special education since educable retarded pupils are not substantially better off in one than the other; since these children largely report satisfaction with their current placement; and since the degree of social acceptance is relatively high and the same for children in both types of special education. Educational policy should be based on relevant factual information about the children and not on the prejudices or intuitions of parents, teachers, principals, or legislators.

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